

VZCZCXRO0407
OO RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHFR #1139/01 1681437
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 161437Z JUN 08
FM AMEMBASSY PARIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3456
INFO RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES PRIORITY
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 3876
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 001139

SIPDIS

NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/YERGER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/16/2018
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [FR](#) [SY](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: FRENCH PRESIDENCY READOUT ON GUEANT/LEVITTE JUNE
15 VISIT TO DAMASCUS

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4. (b), (d).

¶1. (C) French presidency NEA adviser Boris Boillon gave us a quick readout June 16 of the visit made to Damascus a day earlier by Elysee SecGen Claude Gueant, Diplomatic Adviser Jean David Levitte, and Boillon. The trio met with Syrian President Bashar al-Asad for about an hour, followed up by lunch hosted by FM Mu'allim. Asad, "as usual," was "candid and a bit open" in terms of his overall attitude. (Note: The French, dating back to last year's Elyse initiative on Lebanon have consistently described Asad in what they acknowledge to be surprisingly positive terms.) Asad began by raising the Union for the Mediterranean (UPM), confirming his presence at the July 13 Paris summit. Asad asked, however, about changing the name, since "union" to him implied a normal political and working relationship with Israel. Boillon said the French staunchly refused and stressed the union was less a rigid structure than a framework for a "process." Asad next asked for even clearer references in the UPM to the existing Barcelona process. Boillon added, with clear regret, that Asad confided that a key result of the recent Tripoli mini-summit would likely be Qadhafi's attendance of the July 13 Paris summit so that he can express his misgivings about the UPM in person. (Comment: Boillon's called this prospect "unfortunate," and it doubtless recalls many bitter memories of the constant battle he waged with the Libyans over Qadhafi's long and controversial visit last December. End comment)

¶2. (C) On bilateral relations, Asad asked for a bilateral meeting with French President Sarkozy prior to the July 13 summit activities. Boillon said the French agreed in principle but said they would have to refer the matter to Sarkozy. (Comment: We suspect that, in addition to understanding the difficult optics of such a meeting, the French have not yet decided how to handle bilateral meetings with the many heads of state expected to show up. End comment) Asad raised improving economic relations, focused on increased trade and French investment in Syria, as well as upgrading Syria's association agreement with the EU during the French EU presidency. The French response was that progress in all these areas would depend on the overall context of bilateral relations and specifically:

--Progress on full diplomatic relations between Syria and Lebanon: Asad said he would wait for a new Lebanese government to send Mu'allim to Beirut to invite "the three presidents" to Damascus to discuss and formally announce the establishment of full diplomatic ties. Boillon claimed Gueant and Levitte raised with Asad and Mu'allim shared USG/French concerns about the Syrians renegotiating current agreements (e.g., on trade) that were favorable to Lebanon. In addition, Boillon was not certain how the Lebanese would

react to Asad's pledge to eliminate the current supreme council between Syria and Lebanon that effectively manages the "bilateral" relationship and supersedes establishment of embassies in the respective capitals.

--The evolution of Syrian/Israeli talks: Asad openly described these as "very serious" and in Syria's interest. He was optimistic on their progress and claimed Syria was awaiting Israel's response to a two-page document on security issues (Boillon did not know if these included borders or what specific issues were covered) to judge Israeli intentions. According to Boillon, Asad said Syria counted on eventual U.S. and/or European sponsorship of "likely" direct talks. Mu'allim reported that, in order to prevent problems from Palestinians hindering Syrian/Israeli talks, Damascus was in touch with Hamas to tell Hamas it had no desire for an escalation of violence and to encourage release of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit (a dual French/Israeli national).

--Positive gesture on human rights: Gueant and Levitte told Asad that France would like a positive human rights gesture before July 14, an occasion in France that inter alia celebrates France as the birthplace of western conceptions of human rights. Such gestures could include releasing detained opposition figures and allowing Riadh Saif and other ill leaders to leave Syria for medical treatment. Asad responded with a "bloody and firm" no, arguing that France must figure out how to accept Syria's human rights conduct and deal with it in the proper context. It was, in any event, a non-starter, since human rights are an internal matter. When we asked Boillon what the French response was, he indicated the Elyse would likely accept that there was no point in

PARIS 00001139 002 OF 002

pressing this issue as an absolute pre-requisite to better relations.

¶3. (C) On Lebanon, Asad said Syria would not interfere in efforts to form a new government and let the Lebanese come to agreement by themselves. He added his understanding that the principal obstacle was Aoun's insistence on being named finance minister and that it was up Aoun and Siniora to resolve this impasse.

¶4. (U) The Elysee issued a communique June 15 announcing the Gueant/Levitte's visit to Damascus and their meetings with Asad and Mu'allim. It noted that the envoys had transmitted to Asad a message from President Sarkozy and discussed bilateral relations, the situation in the Near East (particularly Lebanon, Israeli/Syrian contacts, and the "peace process") as well as the Union for the Mediterranean. The statement characterized the discussions as "useful and constructive," with both sides agreeing on the need to reinforce bilateral ties, pursue coordinated efforts to bring about a just comprehensive peace to the region, and continue to encourage the Lebanese to implement the Doha accord.

¶5. (C) Comment: Conspicuously absent from Boillon's readout was any mention of media speculation that Sarkozy hopes to arrange an Asad/Olmert meeting on the margins of the July 13 summit. End comment

Please visit Paris' Classified Website at:
[http://www.intelink.sgov.gov/wiki/Portal:Fran ce](http://www.intelink.sgov.gov/wiki/Portal:Fran%20ce)

STAPLETON